From Steel to Screens: Deindustrialization, Mass Incarceration, and the Rise of the Adult Industry in Post-Industrial America
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Abstract

This paper investigates the parallel rise of the U.S. adult entertainment industry and the collapse of traditional manufacturing employment during the late 20th century, situating both within the broader context of America's War on Drugs and mass incarceration. Drawing upon economic, sociological, and historical literature, it argues that the transformation of America's labor economy and punitive state policies created the conditions for marginalized populations—particularly working-class women and formerly incarcerated individuals—to turn to sex work and digital pornography as accessible sources of income. The interplay between deindustrialization, the carceral state, and commodified intimacy reflects the more profound restructuring of American capitalism after 1970.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, the United States has undergone significant economic and social restructuring. The decline of manufacturing, the rapid expansion of the prison-industrial complex, and the growth of the adult entertainment industry are often seen as separate trends. However, these changes are interconnected rather than coincidental. Together, they show a systemic reorganization of labor, social control, and economic survival strategies within a neoliberal economy. This paper argues that as America's industrial base collapsed and the state criminalized poverty through drug policies, a shadow economy of commodified sexual labor emerged as both a form of agency and a response to marginalization from formal labor markets.

I. Deindustrialization and the Collapse of Blue-Collar America

The manufacturing workforce in the United States reached its peak in 1979, with approximately 19.5 million jobs (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Since that time, the industry has experienced a significant decline attributable to various factors, including offshoring, automation, deregulation, and trade liberalization. The closures of factories in Rust Belt states such as Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania have had a devastating impact on working-class communities, particularly African Americans and immigrants, who had recently gained access to these employment opportunities during the postwar period of industrial expansion.

The loss of unionized, high-paying employment opportunities has also diminished pathways for upward mobility. As stable employment opportunities diminish, entire regions have become economically depleted. Sociologist William Julius Wilson (1996) characterized the resulting phenomenon as the "disappearance of work" from inner-city neighborhoods,

which has contributed not only to poverty but also to social disintegration and the proliferation of informal economies.

II. The War on Drugs and the Construction of the Carceral State

Simultaneously, the U.S. government launched the War on Drugs—a series of laws and federal programs that expanded police power and incarceration rates, particularly targeting low-income communities of color. The 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, for example, created a 100:1 sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine, disproportionately impacting Black Americans (Alexander, 2010). By 2000, over 2 million people were incarcerated in the U.S., with drug offenses accounting for over half of the increase in federal prison populations (Western, 2006).

Mass incarceration further entrenched poverty by stripping individuals of the right to vote, limiting access to housing and employment, and fracturing families. In many communities, especially among Black men, imprisonment became a normalized life event. As Loïc Wacquant (2009) argues, the prison system effectively replaced the welfare state as the primary mode of governance for the urban poor.

III. The Rise of the Digital Pornography Industry

While manufacturing collapsed and carceral control expanded, a new economy emerged: the digital adult entertainment industry. Though pornography has long existed, the internet revolutionized its production, distribution, and accessibility. In the early 2000s, the rise of "tube sites" like Pornhub, and later subscription-based platforms like OnlyFans, allowed individuals—particularly women—to bypass gatekeepers and monetize their sexuality directly.

This shift coincided with worsening economic conditions. A 2021 *New York Times* feature documented how thousands of women turned to platforms like OnlyFans during the COVID-19 pandemic to supplement or replace lost income (Lorenz, 2021). However, the trend did not begin in 2020; it is the culmination of decades of economic exclusion. For many, especially those burdened with criminal records or limited education, sex work has become one of the few viable income sources.

IV. Economic Survival and the Criminalization of Labor

The connection between deindustrialization, incarceration, and the adult industry is intentional. It illustrates how labor is reshaped within a neoliberal society. As formal job opportunities decreased and social welfare programs were cut back, millions were forced to turn to criminalized or stigmatized work to survive. Women—especially single mothers and those with prior incarceration—often saw the adult industry as more accessible

than traditional labor markets. Additionally, the racialized and gendered aspects of this change are essential. Black and Latina women, heavily impacted by both incarceration and poverty, make up a growing portion of online sex workers (Bernstein, 2007). Their work is targeted by a predominantly male, often white audience, highlighting how sexual economies help sustain racial and class hierarchies.

V. Cultural Normalization and Systemic Irony

Perhaps the most ironic feature of this shift is how the adult industry—once considered morally taboo—has become culturally normalized in parallel with the criminalization of poverty. While millions have been imprisoned for drug-related offenses, digital sex work is now marketed as "empowering" despite offering no benefits, labor protections, or retirement. The same system that punished drug dealers for economic survival now celebrates digital sex workers for "entrepreneurship."

In this context, it is not empowerment but **necessity** that drives participation. The glorification of sexual labor ignores its roots in systemic abandonment by the state, by employers, and by political leaders of both parties.

Conclusion

From the shuttering of steel mills to the rise of OnlyFans, America's economic transformation is not merely a narrative of markets; it embodies a narrative of social control, exclusion, and adaptation. The adult entertainment industry did not evolve in isolation; it emerged to address the void created by unsuccessful economic policies, systemic racism, and widespread incarceration. Gaining an understanding of these interconnected systems is crucial for any movement seeking to challenge the roots of inequality and restore authentic economic and moral dignity for the working class.

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